

## Hamlet

As Shakespeare's play opens, Hamlet is mourning his father, who has been killed, and lamenting the behaviour of his mother, Gertrude, who married his uncle Claudius within a month of his father's death. The ghost of his father appears to Hamlet, informs him that he was poisoned by Claudius, and commands Hamlet to avenge his death. Though instantly galvanized by the ghost's command, Hamlet decides on further reflection to seek evidence in corroboration of the ghostly visitation, since, he knows, the Devil can assume a pleasing shape and can easily mislead a person whose mind is perturbed by intense grief. Hamlet adopts a guise of melancholic and mad behaviour as a way of deceiving Claudius and others at court—a guise made all the easier by the fact that Hamlet is genuinely melancholic.

Hamlet's dearest friend, Horatio, agrees with him that Claudius has unambiguously confirmed his guilt. Driven by a guilty conscience, Claudius attempts to ascertain the cause of Hamlet's odd behaviour by hiring Hamlet's onetime friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on him. Hamlet quickly sees through the scheme and begins to act the part of a madman in front of them. To the pompous old courtier Polonius, it appears that Hamlet is lovesick over Polonius's daughter Ophelia. Despite Ophelia's loyalty to him, Hamlet thinks that she, like everyone else, is turning against him; he feigns madness with her also .

Hamlet contrives a plan to test the ghost's accusation. With a group of visiting actors, Hamlet arranges the performance of a story representing circumstances similar to those described by the ghost, under which Claudius poisoned Hamlet's father. When the play is presented as planned, the performance clearly unnerves Claudius.

Moving swiftly in the wake of the actors' performance, Hamlet confronts his mother in her chambers with her culpable loyalty to Claudius. When he hears a man's voice behind the curtains, Hamlet stabs the person he understandably assumes to be Claudius. The victim, however, is Polonius, who has been eavesdropping in an attempt to find out more about Hamlet's erratic behaviour. This act of violence persuades Claudius that his own life is in danger. He sends Hamlet to England escorted by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with secret orders that Hamlet be executed by the king of England. When Hamlet discovers the orders, he alters them to make his two friends the victims instead.

Upon his return to Denmark, Hamlet hears that Ophelia is dead of a suspected suicide (though more probably as a consequence of her having gone mad over her father's sudden death) and that her brother Laertes seeks to avenge Polonius's murder. Claudius is only too eager to arrange the duel. Carnage ensues. Hamlet dies of a wound inflicted by a sword that Claudius and Laertes have conspired to tip with poison; in the scuffle, Hamlet realizes what has happened and forces Laertes to exchange swords with him, so that Laertes too dies—as he admits, justly killed by his own treachery. Gertrude, also present at the duel, drinks from the cup of poison that Claudius has had placed near Hamlet to ensure his death. Before Hamlet himself dies, he manages to stab Claudius and to entrust the clearing of his honour to his friend Horatio.